"To promote understanding and appreciation of the religious and spiritual values which abide in the processes and relationships of agriculture and rural life; to define their significance and relate them to the Christian enterprise at home and abroad."

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COOPERATIVE ACTION IN NOVA SCOTIA

Up from the Shadows

By H. S. Randolph*

"Up from the shadows" is an expression that has been applied to the people of Rochdale, England, as they lifted themselves out of their social and economic plight through cooperative organization. This expression is just as fittingly applied to the fisher-folk, farmers, and miners of eastern Nova Scotia. For three hundred years they had seen nothing but a rapidly receding light as the darkness of debt and pressure of capitalism bore ever more heavily down upon them. Now a new light sends its brightening rays into their lives, resulting from an increasing, intelligent cooperative action on the part of the people.

In Nova Scotia is a homogeneous people, closely knit together by traditions and customs brought from Europe centuries ago. We observed that Nova Scotians are also bound more or less to a common level by their greatly restricted geographic, climatic, economic and vocational conditions. But regardless of, or because of these conditioning factors, we saw in Nova Scotia a miraculous movement of economic, social and spiritual regeneration inspired and carried into action among the people by the leaders of St. Francis Xavier University at Antigonish.

"The moral and mental fibre of any people is developed by what they do."** The study clubs sponsored by the Antigonish leaders paved the way for the organization and successful administration of the cooperatives. These clubs gave primary consideration to the economic problems of the people. Thus the study was strongly motivated. "They saw how their thinking would pay." The Antigonish leaders insisted on beginning at the economic end because of the fact that culture, even spirituality, rests in the last analysis, on a proper economic and social set-up. They believe that if the common people are to improve their economic status in our society, they must act as groups. The individual farmer or fisherman cannot make any dent in our highly organized economic society, but as groups they are capable of climbing in a very short time into the driver's seat and getting their hands on the wheel and throttle of their own destiny. On this basis of cooperation the people realized that they can do things for themselves that were impossible

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**The statements in quotation marks throughout this article were taken from the seminar discussions during a tour of cooperatives in Nova Scotia in the summer of 1938.

to their ancestors. They early recognized their power to break into many business fields and to perform services that hitherto they paid others dearly to carry on for them.

It is an achievement of no little significance when any group of Christian people such as the leaders of this university builds into the lives of the people they serve a vibrant enthusiasm and a great faith of action which cuts across three centuries of social, economical, industrial and religious customs, forcing new channels for the flow of new vital experiences. The university secured the hearty cooperation of the church leaders throughout the country, both Roman Catholic and Protestant, and used effectively the local priests and ministers as promoters and leaders of the entire educational and social action program. Thus the power, and inspiration, and leadership of the church has been behind the movement in a very striking and effective manner.

Resulting from this Antigonish movement one finds today on the bleak, jagged, rock-bound coast and towering forest-clad steeps of Nova Scotia a faith that binds the hearts of the fisherman, the farmer, the lumberman and the miner, the Catholic and the Protestant, into a common brotherhood; a faith that can and has moved mountains of economic and spiritual barriers; a faith that has lifted its people "up from the shadows." It has given them a new pattern for their thinking, an emancipated life, not emancipated from a hard life, nor entirely from poverty, but from the old shell of defeated personality. They call it a "Cooperative Movement." They have their Cooperative credit unions, stores, fisheries, canneries, markets, housing projects, and other such organizations, and as one looks into the smiling eyes of these hard-working Nova Scotians, one catches a gleam of a new hope, a new life, and a new enthusiasm.

Our study was particularly concerned with the seven eastern counties of Nova Scotia which are served by the St. Francis Xavier University. The university is a small college with a student body of three hundred, and without imposing equipment; but their smallness in number and lack of equipment are no index to the activities and widespread influences of the school. Its leaders felt twenty years ago that somewhere in the realm of adult education would be found a solution of the people's problems. However, they did not get organized until 1930. They have worked out and executed a new method of extension service that has brought to the people of eastern Nova Scotia their salvation--their renaissance.

The university has found apart from courses, subjects, departments, credits, lectures, scholastic halls and any other of the traditional education procedures, a new approach to life. The university refused to consider herself a reservoir of knowledge; neither a storehouse of equipment nor a base of supplies, but rather only "a creator of forces for molding human lives," not for the few who call upon her for college education, but for the 200,000 who live in the fishing huts down by the sea, in the mining camps, and on the small farms of eastern Nova Scotia. These educational subjects were the young and the old, many of whom were sunk in poverty as wretched as that endured by our southern sharecroppers. The fishermen went to sea in mortgaged boats; farmers were losing their land to creditors, and the miners barely avoided starvation.

These are the people who became the students of the university under its new educational extension program. The people did not leave their homes for this new education. The fisherman stayed by his dripping lobster traps, the farmer by his plough, and the woodman by his axe. But the new education came down to the sea where men toiled with their nets; to the farms where men made hay; to the hillsides where men corded pulp wood; to the mine pits and foundries where men sold their blood for insufficient food, clothing and shelter.

This movement established chairs of education in the little stores where men spent their leisure time; in the boats where men fished; on the wharves where men worked with their nets; or in the field where men toiled in the soil--how like the man of Galilee nineteen centuries ago, who had faith enough in poor people to live and die for them!

Dr. J. J. Tompkins, affectionately called "Jimmy" by his people, was one of the earliest prophets and prime movers of this new educational force. He believed that if people were properly educated they would save themselves. Picture this small man, a priest of dynamic prophetic personality, and a face beaming with unbounded kindness and sympathy; a man of great culture and understanding; a man believing in men much as Jesus did. He also believed that his mission was to set men free from the utter drabness of unfilled lives. Here is Father Tompkins sitting on a cracker barrel in a little store with a crowd of men, their backs to the wall, listening to him, asking him questions about their problems of life. They talked together about hunger, cold, illiteracy, social injustice, economic and political wrongs. These subjects led to discussion about things which they produced to sell, such as fish, lobsters, hay, pulp wood; and things which they had to buy, such as rope, bolts, rigging, barrels, salt, gasoline, oil, clothing and food. They also discussed all the human relations affected by these problems of living. These discussion or study groups led the people to the realization of the fact that they were fighting a losing battle. They were being swallowed up by an unfriendly economic order. They were getting poorer and deeper in debt each year, and others who handled their products were getting richer. These study clubs fired the people with enthusiasm for cooperative action. Their theme song seemed to be, "If we don't study and move forward, we can't complain if the world moves on and leaves us behind."

The people of Nova Scotia had been rugged individualists. But the study club evolved a new philosophy--the Christian way of life, of acting with and for others. Some call it mutual aid. This philosophy is evolving a new technique of human relations which in turn is remaking the economic, social and spiritual life of Nova Scotia. This cooperative or mutual aid way of life fortifies people with a spirit of self-reliance, self-respect, authority, power and independence. A native of Louisdale, Nova Scotia, tells us this intriguing story:

"We are a small community of eighty families--five hundred fifty people. In the winter of 1934 there were seventy of our families on direct relief. The situation looked hopeless until in the fall of 1935 when a good Samaritan came along in the person of a representative of the extension department of St. Francis Xavier University. We organized study clubs and it

was not long before we realized that we were the ones who could remedy the situation, and we went at it in dead earnest.

"Our first step was to study Credit Unions, and in the spring of 1936 we organized the Louisdale Credit Union with some twenty-five members and a share capital of $40.00. Now our share capital is around $1,800, increasing continuously, and our membership is around 170, with 90% of the assets loaned out to members. After the Credit Unions came the study of cooperatives. At first we had a buying club which was later incorporated into the Louisdale Cooperative Society. At first we did a business of from $1,200 to $1,500 a month in a private house, but now we are proud of a new building which we have constructed ourselves and which houses the Cooperative Society and Credit Union. This building was put up with lumber and labor contributed by the people themselves.

"These results obtained through study and thinking are just the beginnings of greater things yet to be accomplished in Louisdale. We have a different outlook upon life. We have no one on direct relief. We feel that there are many industries that could be developed so that in the course of a few years we shall have a community of independent, free and contented people."

This is one of many illustrations of self-initiative on the part of the people of Nova Scotia with no other subsidy but an idea derived through study and discussion promoted by the university and leaders and workers of the church.

We heard many striking human interest stories in Nova Scotia indicating the success of the cooperative movement. Here is one related by a member of the Credit Union:

"A young man wanted to buy a truck to work on the Trans-Canadian Highway which was passing through his community. He borrowed $500 from his Credit Union to supplement his own funds in order to get the truck. A month or so later he took a hemorrhage and had to go to a sanitarium. The Credit Union took over the truck, hired a driver and worked it for him. They not only paid back the indebtedness to the Credit Union but kept on working it for him and paid his bill at the sanitarium."

It is Christianity in concrete form. Perhaps the greatest effect of cooperative action in Nova Scotia besides developing thrift is the influence which it has on the moral development of its members. It seems to make people honest. We observed with keen interest that in Nova Scotia doors were not locked and windows were not barred, but churches, Protestant and Catholic, were filled with worshippers.

In all the experiences of the Nova Scotia credit unions there has not yet been any serious default. In one instance a group of coal miners had $23,000 in their credit union four months ago. They had loaned $73,000 during two and one-half years and never lost a nickel. It may be group sanction, but whatever it is, it makes the people honest and that is something to be thankful for in these days of loose morals and graft.

I am informed that in the United States over five thousand credit unions do an annual business of some two million dollars. In the crash after 1929 over five thousand banks failed, but there was not a crash in a single credit union.

Someone may say, what has all this to do with me? These basic activities are secular and materialistic and have nothing to do with the cultural and spiritual life of the people; but this is not true except for those who see the work of Nova Scotia in a very superficial way. The techniques behind the successful running of these ventures involve a knowledge of economic and group action which is highly philosophical and cultural. They contain a whole and complete philosophy of life. They are the intrinsic foundations of cultural and spiritual life. The university might have started in with Shakespeare, grand opera, and religion, and probably in the end come back to economics, but they preferred to begin with economics and with consecrated Christian leadership and work the other way.

The result of the movement has proved the wisdom of their procedure. Already many of these simple people, many of whom only recently learned to read and write, are building themselves libraries, getting music and recreation into their communities. They are erecting better homes, some on the cooperative housing plan. There are also many schemes on for better health for the people; cooperative medicine and insurance, and last but not least, they are supporting their churches and making them beautiful. Yes, here in little, rock-ribbed Nova Scotia, through a realistic self-help program resulting in prosperity and security, is an emerging new social, economic and spiritual order. The people are still poor; their life is hard; and their homes are of the plainest, but they are alert and happy and enthusiastic, which are the signs we saw everywhere of spiritual regeneration.

One of the Nova Scotia men said, "There is something else attached to organization and cooperation. It gives us not only dollars and cents; it teaches us to trust one another. It teaches us to transact business with one another, and best of all it teaches us to live in peace and harmony with one another."

This renaissance in Nova Scotia has been wrought because those in positions of leadership had faith in the common people--faith that they can learn; and that they can work out and determine their own destinies; faith that they are as good as anybody else; faith that they can be saved. If such a transformation can be wrought in so short a time in Nova Scotia, with so few leaders and with the variety of economic and spiritual resources naturally restricted by geographical and climatic conditions, what can be done by the Church, with so many resources, with so many consecrated leaders, and with work located in such strategic places of the nation?

In too many places we have not made a recognized effective impact upon the regions we have served. As enthusiastic mission workers we have doubtless done too much for the people we are serving in certain areas, and allowed the people to do too little for themselves. Our task should be that of cultivating, through a new missionary education technique, self-reliant action, derived from a study and understanding of their own problems and

needs, rather than try to graft upon the people an outside culture of music, art, literature and the like. Bring to them a method of studying their own under-privileged conditions and needs, and guide them in finding a way out. Ministers, mission teachers and evangelists must inevitably address themselves to this new task of adult education of all the people, for therein is the "daily bread," the subject of our unanswered prayer for all mission fields for all ages. Too often we have provided the people with a little sweet sorghum, but with no bread with which to "sop it." "If given a chance, people will save themselves."